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SUBJECT: Disaster Preparedness in the Austrian Alps

1. Summary: On March 2 and 3, 2005, ConGen and RSO visited the Tyrolean capital of Innsbruck for briefings on disaster preparedness by state government officials. A tour of the State Fire Fighting Institute specifically included, at our request, tunnel fire rescues. We then visited the Avalanche Crisis Center to learn how avalanche warnings are issued, and what resources are brought to bear on avalanche rescues. The Avalanche Crisis Center also monitors radiation levels, earthquake activity, flooding and flash floods, wildfires and mountain rescues. Authorities seemed to have significant funding for their programs. They have made detailed plans to deal with catastrophic events, including training, equipment pre-positioning and regular maintenance and monitoring. The personal contacts established by this visit with further enhance our ability to deal effectively with disasters in this region. The RSO also took the opportunity to pay a call on the head of Landesamt fr Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekpfung (LVT) Dr. Spoer who is in charge of the protection of visiting VIP's and all counter terrorism activities in this region of Austria. End Summary.

2. A state of about 600,000 inhabitants, Tyrol has more than 40 million hotel over-nights a year, and is a major tourist destination for both winter sports and summer vacations. The Inn Valley, which cuts through Tyrol, is one of the major transit routes for North-South travel in Europe. Sixty percent of Austrian avalanche deaths occur in Tyrol, a reflection of the percentage of tourism it receives. The Consular Section has only a few Amcits registered as living in Tyrol, but some U.S. companies, such as Motorola, are located in the state. We estimate that in the peak months of July and August, over 24,000 Americans may be present in Austria on any given day, many of them in the Tyrolean Alps.

3. ConGen and RSO had requested briefings on several topics, including preparations for tunnel fires. State fire fighting authorities gave us a tour of the 3-year old fire-fighting institute in Telfs, where they have built a tunnel for training fire fighters on both train and automotive tunnels. They estimate the chances of a train tunnel fire to be very low, especially as train engineers are taught to pull through the tunnel at all costs before stopping. Their focus is therefore on automotive tunnels, of which there are many in this alpine state.

4. All fire fighters except those in the capital city of Innsbruck are volunteers. Every one of the Tyrolean municipalities that has a tunnel entrance in its district receives special training specifically on tunnel fires. Special equipment for entering and remaining in tunnels for up to 4 hours has been pre-positioned in these communities. The equipment is tested annually. Newer tunnels have exits every 50 meters, taking pedestrian to safe areas. They also have oxygen detectors to alert the local fire station to possible fires. Since Austrian entry into the EU, Tyrolean authorities no longer know what hazardous cargo may be transported through the state, so they train for various kinds of fires and conditions.

5. The Avalanche Crisis Center in Innsbruck monitors the slopes through 80 different automatic weather stations located both on peaks and on the slopes, checking the snow depth, slope conditions and wind speeds. The staff then issues a warning level for the day, and broadcasts on the radio by 0735 every morning from November to April. They also update the center's website, send text messages, email a list-server and fax warnings to subscribers. A map a www.lawine.at shows the degree of slope of every ski slope as well as the warning level for each slope every day during the snow season. The public is invited to contact the Center by email with comments on back-country conditions. The staff also makes 150 trips to the slopes a year to monitor snow conditions.

6. According to the center's staff, up to 85 per cent of avalanche deaths are avoidable. They usually occur when skiers or snowboards ignore posted warnings and attempt

to use slopes which are steeper than 35 degrees when warning levels are above level 3 on a 5 point scale. The worst avalanche conditions occur in March, when fatalities are also the highest, but hundreds of avalanches of varying sizes occur on Tyrolean slopes every day between November and April. The popularity of extreme sports has led to an increase of adventurers going off-piste or into remote areas, with a resulting increase in avalanche fatalities. Avalanche victims may be charged for the rescue costs in sports-related rescues. State prosecutors may bring criminal charges against people who cause avalanches that endanger lives.

17. There are 17 helicopter rescue companies operating in Tyrol. Every municipality that could be affected by an avalanche must have an alarm plan as well as a rescue plan. Each mayor heads the local crisis team. Local authorities are charged with determining when the ski slopes should close due to avalanche threat, and may also close roads for the short or long term based on the threat level. There is a mountain rescue unit for every municipality which works with local military offices to conduct rescues throughout the year.

18. As Tyrol's only 24-hour, 7-day crisis center, the Avalanche Crisis Center has taken on other duties as well. For instance, it monitors earthquake activity, which results from the African Plate meeting the European Plate in the Inn Valley. It also monitors radiation levels throughout the state. It can activate 1000 sirens located in the 279 municipalities throughout the state in order to alert people to threats. These sirens are tested monthly. The sirens signal the local population to check radio and television for warnings regarding flash floods, high water, wild fires and other catastrophes. Recently the Center was tasked with serving as the call center for Tyrolean families wanting information about relatives caught up in the tsunamis in the Indian Ocean region. Center staff have been issued specially made Motorola cell phones that provide them with by-the-minute information on weather conditions, slope conditions and other useful information from the internet.

19. Embassy Comment: The Tyrolean authorities we met were definitely pleased by the Embassy interest and eager to answer our questions. They were satisfied with the support they received from the state government and felt they had adequate resources. They appear to have planned in detail for a wide range of catastrophes and mass casualties. They train continuously and test equipment often. They use many different means to alert the public to potential dangers, including the internet, emails, and text messaging. This trip expands on the personal contacts that already exist between our local staff and the Tyrolean authorities. Meeting the relevant authorities and showing the USG's interest will certainly pay off when we need to respond to disasters in Tyrol, and has already facilitated communication in individual cases. End Comment. Brown